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Towards a Folk Cinema

The question of a 'folk cinema' remains relatively unexplored in the discourses surrounding global film studies. To what extent should we, or *can* we speak of a folk cinema? The very notion would seem to risk a sense of antimony; the two words perhaps irreconcilable, each threatening to destroy the other.

To indulge in caricature, Folk conjures a sense of popular register; of open doors and the 'democratic muse' (Munro 1996); a sense of all-come, all-served. Folk is rooted, embedded within the community in 'free', open-to-all venues. Folk is purportedly uncomfortable with the individualism of authors, star-adulation and hierarchy. Folk is conventionally found in the transient 'soft-edged', multivocal forms of oral transmission, rather than the 'hard-edged' forms of 'high art': there is less a sense of definitive articles, more a sense of forms in constant process. Finally, Folk has strong associations with working classes and socialism: cultural movements articulating notions of 'the folk' and folk culture frequently focus upon a sense of revisionism and a politics of recognition.

Cinema on the other hand is relatively 'autocratic', driven by hierarchical process. Cinema is expensive, restricting access, purchase and participation to a select few: an elite. To make a film you must have considerable resources. Cinema's presiding (if partially outmoded) assumptions are of glitz and glamour; spotlights upon one person (or couple), with the 'ordinary folk' in the stalls, cast as extras or onlookers, behind barriers at red carpet premieres, denied access. Cinema is frequently author (or auteur) centric; its presiding individualist preoccupations with star directors, actors and writers recall Beethovenian models of the artist-god – a separation between audience and stars. Cinema audiences sit largely in the dark, in thrall to the dominating presence of the screen. In Western cultures, the audience does not usually participate actively or expressively in the act of cinema – they listen while they are spoken to, literally dwarfed by onscreen stars who are sold as being somehow brighter than their audiences; a fetishized 'otherness' and 'unreachableness'.

Such caricatures serve to illustrate the marked sense of dissonance between Folk and Cinema. Do the unstable, unruly inferences of the word 'folk' allow a sufficiently stable foundation for any projection of genre? If so, can contingent, local folk cinemas be summed into the approximation of a global Folk Cinema without an overabundance of epistemic violence? This study will mount a cautious yet optimistic case for the framing of divergent traditions of cinema through emergent conceptions of a 'folk cinema', arising from within a Scottish cultural context looking outwards towards global film history. Conducting a reconnaissance of diverse traditions of world cinema, I will look at specific instances in which 'folk concepts' have been articulated at different moments during the filmmaking process: informing either a film's production process, its ultimate representation of 'the folk' or its exhibition practice. I propose a positive definition of a Folk Cinema premised upon four, interlinked attributes: revisionist representation, ethnographic verisimilitude, collective perspective and the translation of traditional cultural forms.

My own work as a filmmaker, drawing upon the work of the folklorist, poet, and political activist Hamish Henderson and the Scottish folk revival movement in *When The Song Dies* (2012) and *Blackbird* (2013) takes place within a wider context of folk-engaged filmmaking in Scotland. **The** contingent folk concepts articulated by a recent, diverse group of Scottish films – among them Paul Wright’s *For Those In Peril* (2013), Theatre Workshop Scotland’s *The Happy Lands* (2012), the short films of Tom Chick (2011; 2012; 2015) and Adam Stafford (2010; 2015) themselves prompt the question of a folk cinema.

Looking outwards from Scotland towards broader perspectives on global film history, it’s possible to identify a disparate group of auteurist filmmakers who have seemingly defined their work through engagements with collective subaltern experience, or ‘folk culture’. In Italy the films of the Taviani brothers (*Padre Padrone* (1977), *The Night of the Shooting Stars* (1982), *Kaos* (1984) and *Fiorile* (1993)) centre upon oral storytelling, plural perspectives, and an engagement with the mythic in rooted and semi-diasporic indigenous experience. In Russia, spanning nearly 100 years, different generations of filmmakers - among them Alexander Dovhenkho, Sergei Parajanov and Alexey Federchenkho - have continued, with varying emphases, to define their work through engagements with the myth, costume and politics of traditional, indigenous communities. In Senegal, the films of Ousmane Sembene have championed the causes and experience of subaltern collectivities in both rural and urban environments. In England, the Amber Collective have dedicated over five decades of work to plurivocal, semi-ethnographic representations of working class communities in Tyneside, through experimental, collaborative and embedded working processes. In the USA, John Sayles has employed plural perspectives and an interest in myth to depict community experience in *Matewan* (1987), *Lone Star* (1996) and the *Secret of Roan Inish* (1994), whilst David Simon’s expansive TV project (*The Corner* (2000), *The Wire* (2008), *Treme* (2013)) echoes Amber’s concerns with ethnographic verisimilitude, vernacular storytelling, and choric community perspective.

This speculative global canon of Folk Cinema is not merely retrospective. More recently, Michelangelo Frammartino’s *Alberi* (2013) in Italy, Claudia Llosa’s *Madeinusa* (2006) and *Milk of Sorrow* (2009) in Peru, Jean-Charles Hue’s *The Dorkels* (2014) in France, Alexsey Fedorchenko’s *Silent Souls* (2010) and *Celestial Wives of the Meadow Mari* (2012) in Russia, Selma Vilhunen’s *Laulu* (2014) in Finland and Andrew Kotting’s *By Our Selves* (2015) in England continue to articulate contingent folk-concepts as a core part of their cinematic aesthetics.

An ongoing interest in divergent representations of ‘folk culture’ thus seems something of a trope in world cinema, and a recurrent concern for filmmakers beyond Scotland. Consequently, the study of plural folk cinemas would seem of demonstrable use: a study of contingent, historicized folk-concepts, and the manner in which they are articulated by different cinemas for different purposes, mediating either a film’s approach to representation, its creative process or both. Recurrent ways of seeing collectivities, ‘folk concepts’ represent a trope within world cinema

which, when situated historically, provides an illuminating lens through which to look at a film's particular 'chronotope' (Bakhtin 1982, p.425), the manner in which it is imprinted by historical and cultural location. How does a given film conceive of 'people' at a particular point in history?

The notion of a world Folk Cinema contains an innate tension between the local and the global. Different instances of folk cinema do seem, when considered in parallel, to display certain formal echoes and resonances; to share similar methods and draw upon similar cinematic and extra-cinematic precedents (such as ethnography, socialist political theory, Italian neorealism and Flahertian romantic humanism), similar political orientations and ways of seeing people. Such a Utopian 'world folk' project may be innately subverted, however, by the familiar problems of genre- and canon-formation on one hand, and globalising projects rooted in Western epistemology on the other. And if there is, or could be, such a thing as a Folk Cinema – a genre able to look beyond or 'above' the contingent historicities of its disparate instantiations – is it not problematic such a genre be defined or proposed from the West? A global conception of Folk Cinema would perhaps be a less fraught proposition were it to originate from within the indigenous people's movement, from a community-embedded auteur such as Zacharius Kunuk.

Nonetheless, the divergent yet mutually-resonant filmmaking traditions outlined above present a compelling case for the discussion of a folk cinema. Disparate filmmakers (among them many contemporary Scottish directors) would appear to themselves to ask the questions of a folk cinema on a local level at different points in space and time, and I argue that a more global exploration is of compelling use to progressive political discourses in Scotland and further afield.

Considering where a possible Folk Cinema might be situated between art cinema, ethnographic cinema and political cinemas such as Third and Fourth Cinema, it is interesting to consider Paul O'Reilly's designation of the work of the Amber Collective as 'cultural film' (2009). Whilst O'Reilly's term may seem broad, it's indicative of the recurrent proximity of 'folk-concepts' to notions of 'culture' (what Clifford has referred to as a possibly outdated 'culture-concept' (1988, p.274)), and – further still – to the close proximity of a number of discordant yet related discourses, in particular those situated around contemporary anthropology and culture studies. Of particular significance to the following discussion will be the axis between leftist, anti-imperial politics and ethnography (both frequently characterised by their concern for collective subaltern experience), which can be loosely mapped in parallel with a fraught axis of self and other; of emic perspective (that which is located *within* a community) and etic perspective (that which is located *outside* a community, looking in). Such irresolvable tensions will rightly remain to haunt and disturb the possibilities of a Folk Cinema.

When one considers the sort of reflexive, interdisciplinary work that has gone into the global retheorising and unlearning of paradigmatic Western ways of looking at subaltern communities – Johanne Fabian's work on allochronism (1983), Homi Bhabha on hybridity (2004), Paul Gilroy on diaspora (1993), Faye Ginsburg on

indigenous media-making (1991), Epeli Hau'ofa on indigenous cosmopolitanism (2008), and James Clifford's global appraisal of the significance of the indigenous people's movement (2013) to name but a few – the notion of 'folk', whilst retaining ubiquitous popular usage in Scotland, risks seeming somewhat outdated as a way of seeing and referring to subaltern experience. The following discussion will consider the unruly inferences of the word 'folk', before considering the extent to which such a term might be mobilised by progressive political projects. Amidst postmodern projects of reappraisal the notion of 'tradition' is enjoying a cautious, inflected reassessment in the discourses surrounding anthropology and culture studies (Phillips & Schochet 2004). Clifford in particular has discussed the effect indigenous people's movements have had upon global, 'paradigmatic' ways of thinking about culture and post-modernity (2004; 2013; Sahlins 1999). Could outdated notions of 'folk' warrant a similar, cautious reappraisal?

Attempting to comprehend 'folk's refracted usage, we can recall Raymond Williams' discussion of the notion of 'masses':

[T]o other people, we also are masses. Masses are other people. There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses... The fact is, surely, that a way of seeing other people which has become characteristic of our kind of society, has been capitalized for the purposes of political or cultural exploitation. (1960, p.300)

The same is largely true of 'folk': both words encapsulate ways of looking at people (usually *other* people) as collectivities; ways of seeing and their consequent images that are frequently co-opted and articulated by diverse political projects. It's telling that, in the UK, the word 'folk' is just as comfortable in the vocabulary of Nigel Farage (Hope 2014) as it is in the vocabulary of socialist, anti-imperialist activists like Hamish Henderson (Neat 2007, p.237). At a historical juncture where notions of 'the people' are regularly rehearsed by diverse political appeals to populism (Judith Butler recently discussed Donald Trump's 'construction' of 'the people' (Salmon, 2016)) the study of the inventive processes underlying conceptions of 'folk' or 'the people' would seem as crucial as ever. Despite, and indeed *because* of their seemingly 'universal' claims, it is imperative to contextualise folk-concepts as being deeply contingent: ways of rehearsing the 'universal' which conversely are rooted in historical and geographical specificity and the employ of particularized political projects.

Illustrating the divergent articulations of the word 'folk', one frequently finds warring, contradictory folk concepts within a single historical location. The social geographer Fraser MacDonald has described how within Western Cold War discourses, for example,

the very idea of 'folk', with its image of organic political community, was an important symbolic resource for both communists and conservatives alike. ... Richard Dorson, the purported 'father of American folklore', implored the US Senate to invest in folklore research claiming that "through ignorance [we are]

playing directly into the hands of the Communists” [...] The American Christian Right were certainly worried about the insidious socialist influence of folk musicians (‘Marxist minstrels’) on impressionable youth. (MacDonald 2011)

Elsewhere in history, Michael Holquist has discussed how depictions of ‘the folk’ in Bakhtin’s work were “precisely and diametrically opposed to those celebrated in Soviet folklorico”:

Bakhtin’s ‘folk’ are blasphemous rather than adoring, cunning rather than intelligent; they are coarse, dirty, and rampantly physical, reveling in oceans of strong drink, poods of sausage, and endless coupling of bodies. In the prim world of Stalinist Biedermeier, that world of lace curtains ... and militant propriety, Bakhtin’s claim that the folk not only picked their noses and farted, but enjoyed doing so, seemed particularly unregenerate. The opposition is not merely between two different concepts of the common man, but between two fundamentally opposed worldviews with nothing in common except that each finds its most comprehensive metaphor in the folk. (Bakhtin 1984, p.xix)

Folk-concepts can thus be seen to play pivotal roles in articulating highly divergent political projects, a cautionary reminder when approaching even the most progressive rehearsals of folk ‘universalism’.

Returning to Williams’ discussion of ways of ‘seeing’ collectivities, ‘folk’ does seem to carry a wider set of inferences than the notion of ‘the masses’. Folk-concepts frequently go beyond designation of a bounded ‘people’ to inscribe particular qualities, key among them a sense of status or class. According to Hall and Whannel, the term ‘folk culture’ incorporated rural communities as well as industrial classes, whilst always tending to suggest communal ways of life (Hall & Whannel 1964, p.52). ‘Folk’ is almost always subaltern, or ‘underother’: working class, proletariat, peasantry, lay-people and ‘the common man’. Though the bourgeoisie and upper classes (terms which themselves belie a somewhat dated focus) are frequently involved in the designation (or ‘invention’) of ‘folk’ communities they are rarely considered or consider themselves to be ‘folk’. Whilst ‘folk’ is frequently used to denote a sense of the rural and the historical - ‘outside’ of contemporary metropolitan centres - it can also be ‘urban’ and ‘contemporary’, inferring industrial and post-industrial working class communities.

‘Folk’ also has complex relations with notions of ‘tradition’ and the preindustrial. Whilst some folk concepts are almost exclusively predicated upon notions of tradition and organic cultural transmission, others have less or no inference of tradition, and refer to a sense of bounded or semi-bounded collectivity. In 2017 folk concepts would seem to reach beyond the industrial, articulated by projects that are highly postindustrial, postmodern and at home with globalized technologies. In Scotland, the folk concept mobilized by the Yes movement in 2014 (and Common Weal’s ‘All of Us first’) reflected a semi-bounded, yet culturally heterogeneous community, often speaking to each other online from disparate parts of the country and abroad.

To talk of 'folk' is frequently also to select 'this people' and not 'that people', and thus delineate who is 'folk' and who is not, provoking a dangerous sense of 'how wide is the we' (Phillips & Schochet 2004, p.20). Discussing an early draft of this manuscript Colin McArthur suggested that a 'folk cinema' must be careful not to become a 'volk cinema'. The implications of 'folk's delineations of communal and cultural identity are intensely contingent, awkwardly incorporating many of the darkest moments of history alongside inspirational campaigns of counter-hegemonic resistance. Whilst such delineations of collective identity can compellingly be seen to serve the progressive political interests of a marginalized subaltern people, similar delineations risk articulation as chauvinism, racism and fascism. Designating populations as 'the people' is thus an ontologically and epistemologically fraught proposition. That cinema would actively participate in the representation and consolidation of images of collective identity – local and global, emically-projected and etically-imposed – would seem a given. The films speculatively discussed here as Folk Cinema each mobilize a reflexive identity politics whereby representations are conceived both with reference to (and frequently in collaboration with) emic notions of authenticity and a certain sense of discursive pragmatism about how such images resonate discursively on a world stage.

When identification of a 'folk' (or indeed a 'volk') is made from relatively 'interior' or emic locations, nativism is a danger: of 'pure blood', exclusivity and fascism (as indeed Herder's notion of 'the volk' was employed to delineate ethnic nationalism in Nazi Germany). Considering criticisms of emergent indigenous nationalisms, Clifford has described how "some critics have suggested that contemporary indigenous assertions are inherently exclusivist, even potentially fascist" (2013, p.14). Countering wholesale dismissals of self-prescribed emic essentialisms, however, Gayatri Spivak has theorized the benefits to subaltern communities of strategic essentialism, as a means of self-delineation and organized counter to the insidious 'universalisms' of hegemonic discourses: a conscious, pragmatic expression of difference; of different political priorities, concerns and needs (Spivak 1988).

The term 'folk' would thus seem to embody a spectrum of highly divergent ways of looking at people: different images of 'collectivities', some characterised by progressive political intention, some not. Folk's ambivalence is provocative. Whilst 'folk' frequently stands for a kind of collectivised 'noble savage' (with all the attendant problems therewith (Clifford 2013, p.102)), its very sense of grandeur simultaneously expresses a dormant sense of collectivised political entitlement: what might be considered the root of 'folk's demand for coevalness. Whilst it would be possible to consider the folk cinema credentials of films such as *The Wicker Man* (1973) or ruralist British cinema (Young 2010; Franks et al. 2006), my argument is primarily concerned with advancing a definition of folk cinema that might be considered *useful* to leftist discourses, and therefore chooses to focus on films predicated upon folk-concepts that might demonstrably be considered politically progressive.

A survey of diverse literatures yields surprisingly little concrete discussion of a 'folk cinema'. Despite myriad instances of cinematic engagements with 'folk culture', there has yet to appear any overarching discussion of a folk cinema. Folk is frequently employed as a by-word for 'popular', and appears as such in discussions of popular cinema and genre. Parker Tyler declares 'cinema is a folk art' (Tyler 1971, p.1), and elsewhere Mikel Koven has explored interdisciplinary intersections of folklore and film studies, and the connections between different modes of popular culture, looking in particular at the appearances of urban legend and lore in horror films (Koven 2006; Sherman & Koven 2007; Koven 2008). Folk concepts are also frequently used to describe 'democratized' manners of folk production, such as 'sweded films' (Walters 2012) and other 'peopled' processes submitting the discrete forms and 'hard edges' of popular cinema to public purchase and reinterpretation.

'Folk horror' has developed a relatively stable sense of cinematic genre that 'folk' minus the 'horror' has not. Here 'folk' is proximate to *Sight and Sound's* notion of 'Old Weird Britain' (Young 2010); British 'folkness' as historical and pastoral, a semi-exoticist aesthetic that recalls notions of the past as 'a foreign country' (Lowenthal 1985). Here the 'folksy' past, refracted through the lens of the present, is constructed as a source of strangeness, threat and uncanny resonance. The canon of 'folk horror' comprises mainly a series of English films such as the Scottish-set *The Wicker Man* (and more recently Ben Wheatley's *Kill List* (2011) and *A Field in England* (2013)), whereby a largely rural framing of pre-Christian/animist 'folk culture' is mined as a source of abject horror for the 'civilised', contemporary metropolitan subject.

One frequently encounters a proximity between discourses articulating folk concepts and those grounded in ethnographic and anthropological epistemology – both where ethnography is used as a reference for more artistically-focussed filmmaking (such as the narrative device of the cultural outsider (MacLeod 2006)), and in discussion of the institutionalised practice of ethnography itself. Elsewhere, auteurist discussions of art cinema have occasionally invoked folk concepts with varying degrees of politicisation. Discussion of the experience of 'ordinary folk' is commonplace in commentary upon Italian neorealism, whilst elsewhere Vance Kepley Jr has referred to the influential Russian director Alexander Dovhenkho as being "consistently characterized as the great folk artist of cinema" (Kepley 1986, p.3). The specific notion of a 'folk film' has been used intermittently by Gabriel to refer to Third Cinema works such as Littin's *Promised Land* (1973), and underlies discussion of how Gerima's *Harvest: 3000 Years* (1976) and the work of Sembene explore aspects of translated orality and collectivist perspective (1982).

While maintaining a sense of the myriad attendant issues, discussion will now turn to more concrete consideration and positive definition of a Folk Cinema, or, at the very least, a generalized discussion of divergent folk cinemas. Such discussion retains as a core point of reference the Utopian, socialist, anti-imperial folk concepts articulated by Hamish Henderson and Teshome Gabriel, whilst cautiously looking outwards toward global cinemas from there. Considering the utopian universalism of such a project, it is worth reflecting upon the manner in which pragmatic conceptions of

universalism are finding increasing resonance with a growing number of contemporary political theorists, such as the work of Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015) and Jimmy Kasas Clausen (2014), who has surveyed the manner in which contemporary political philosophers such as Alan Badiou, Jacques Ranciere, Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have made claims of universality and large scale action central to their conception of leftist politics. Articulations of pragmatic leftist universalisms also arguably underscore the older theorisations of a Third Cinema by writers like Willemsen and Gabriel (Pines & Willemsen 1990); a simultaneously unified and diverse, local and global cinema driven by a shared socialist, anti-imperialist politics. Similar arguments can be made for a Folk Cinema.

A key concern in the following discussion will be *where*, or rather *when*, during the process of making and distributing a film, a folk concept is articulated. Some of the films framed here as 'folk cinema' (such as the films of Sergei Parajanov) articulate their 'folk concepts' merely through textual representations of 'the folk' and it is worth acknowledging the innate dissonance between such individualist, auterist-driven variants of art cinema and leftist ideals of 'folkness'. Other filmmakers, such as the Amber Collective can be seen to enact their 'folk concepts' earlier in the filmmaking processes as an inextricable part of multi-vocal, community-embedded creative methods. Here the folk-concept might be said to be 'multi-modal', for the image of subaltern collectivity is established as a priority both during the process of making a film, and in the ultimate textual diegesis of the film itself. In comparison with Parajanov, whose folk-concepts might be said to be merely epistemological, the Amber Collective could be said to enact a folk concept on both an ontological and epistemological basis. Considering the multimodality of 'folk concepts' within a folk cinema, one might also consider manners in which 'folk concepts' are also articulated at the level of exhibition, such as the community exhibition practices of Third Cinema auteurs like Sembene and Sanjines (Gabriel 1982, p.24) and the Amber Collective, who have all taken it upon themselves to organize screenings in the subaltern communities considered to be the films' primary audiences. Here we must acknowledge another area of dissonance, however, for such community-embedded exhibition practices tend to be exceptional and the inevitable audiences for many of the films framed herewith as 'folk cinema' do not tend to be 'popular' or 'folk' audiences, but rather the cosmopolitan, bourgeois audiences frequenting art-house cinemas. The dissonance with the utopian Hendersonian folk-concept is easily apparent. Can a film sustain a claim to 'folkness' if it is expressly produced to be watched by a cosmopolitan bourgeoisie? From one perspective a more convincing case might be rehearsed for *Star Wars* as Folk Cinema than the semi-avant-garde address of Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* (1965). Nonetheless, it is the contention of this study that the commitment of filmmakers like Parajanov, Kunuk, Sembene or the Amber Collective to the experience, representation and concerns of subaltern collectivities is of greater weight in characterizing a film's theoretical 'folkness' (its commitment to 'people') than its mass take-up by popular audiences.

Here I suggest four, interlinked attributes that may link or even characterise plural folk cinemas: revisionist representation, 'ethnographic' verisimilitude, collective perspective, and the translation of oral forms to cinema.

1) revisionist, counter-hegemonic representation

Recalling the Hendersonian project in Scotland, it would seem a priority for folk cinemas to prioritise a sense of Gramscian revisionism in pursuing a 'politics of recognition' (Taylor & Gutmann 1992) or 'coevalness' (Fabian 1983) for subaltern collectivities through 'accurate', self-directed (or at least self-sanctioned) representations countering the metonymicized images of hegemonic discourses. In this respect, Italian neorealism (or perhaps the popular myth of neorealism rather than its more complex historical actuality (Wagstaff 2013)) is a distinct precursor. Indeed, many neorealist films - *La Terra Trema* (1948) and *Bitter Rice* (1949) in particular - have strong claims to being Folk Cinema, in their focus upon subaltern experience, choric perspective and ethnographic verisimilitude. Christopher Wagstaff has described a concern with 'lowered voices' or *sermo humilis* as a hallmark of neorealist cinema; how the neorealists purported to look beyond the grand narratives of fascism and the mythicizing façades of Hollywood to the marginalized and hitherto unheard voices of the 'authentic' Italy (Wagstaff 2007, p.90).

The films framed thus far as Folk Cinema each enact conscious projects of revisionism with varying degrees of political or dialectical purpose: Amber's multifaceted portraits of peripheral working class experience in Newcastle and County Durham; Simon's choric, multiperspectival depiction of working class and subaltern black experience in *The Wire* and *The Corner*; the Taviani brothers' depictions of rural community perspective in *Padre Padrone*, *Kaos*, *Night of the Shooting Stars*; Sayles' depiction of striking miners in *Matewan*; Kunuk's counter-ethnographic portrayals of indigenous Alaskan history and experience in *Atanarjuat* (2001) and *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2006); Sembene's portrayals of rural and urban subaltern experience in Senegal and Safi Faye's counter-ethnography of Senegalese rural community perspective on neocolonial agricultural policy in *Kaddu Beykat* (1976). Each invokes a politics of recognition in voicing the hitherto 'unheard' perspectives of lowered subaltern voices within the privileged arena of cinema.

Such notions of 'lowered voices' raise crucial questions, however, of emic and etic perspective: of how such 'lowered voices' are articulated, and by whom. Rehearsed discursively, the notion of incoming filmmakers 'giving voice' to subaltern communities is deeply problematic, recalling Gayatri Spivak's emphatic decree that 'the subaltern cannot speak' (1987). One of the crucial questions of a folk cinema centres upon who is making a film (and for what purpose) and who is watching it. Can a folk cinema originate from 'without', from the etic perspective of a community outsider? The claims to 'folkness' of films made by the relatively emic perspectives of community insiders such as Zacharius Kunuk, Ousmane Sembene, Safi Faye, Kidmat Tahimak and Tony Gatlif certainly demonstrate a more compelling case to being Folk Cinema than those of 'incomers' pursuing projects of romantic, exoticist, Flahertian humanism. It is easier to rehearse the prerogative and 'authenticity' of perspective of the emic filmmaker, who might be described as performing a function

similar to that of a community bard or griot (Gabriel 1982, p.89)¹, placing his or her craft at the service of a community. (Amber have invoked similar notions in reference to the aesthetic theory of R.G. Collingwood (Thomas 2014, p.206)).

Whilst such distinctions between 'inside' and 'outside' demonstrably exist in the empirical realities of cultural difference, however, they frequently lack the neatness and certainty with which they are rehearsed in print. Amber, for example, have discussed the degree of cultural unlearning and loss of class identity fostered by education. Amber's Peter Roberts has described how, because

we come from very similar backgrounds, Murray [Martin] from Stoke, me from Leeds, we had the same education experiences, which takes you away from your background. Both of us felt a certain loss that that process had brought about (Amber 2008).

How does one designate Amber's cultural position tidily? As students from working class backgrounds, do Roberts and Martin remain 'working class' and retain uncomplicatedly emic perspectives on working class life once they have attended art school and become filmmakers, BBC technicians and art school lecturers? Similar could be said of Sembene or Safi Faye, or indeed any filmmaker of international repute originating from a subaltern background. Whilst Sembene started life in a position of easily rehearsable emic authenticity as the son of a fisherman, his training as a film director in Europe (and subsequent travels in global cosmopolitan orbits) suggest a greater degree of cultural privilege and 'unlearning' than that of the rural subaltern communities he represents in films like *Moolaade* (2004). Is Sembene's perspective on subaltern communities who have not experienced his agency or opportunity emic or etic? Both, one could argue. Such discussions of cultural location are deeply fraught and easily become offensive. They are invoked here not to 'debunk' Amber or Sembene, or point to seeming 'inauthenticities' in their life or work, but rather to highlight a sense of liminality: the degrees between emic and etic status, and the difficulty in mapping over-determined cultural locations onto the idealizing schemas of academic discourse. Discussing similar issues within the indigenous people's movement, Clifford has noted the need for changing paradigms, criticizing "intractable double binds" such as the "assumed contradiction between material wealth and cultural authenticity" (Clifford 2013, p.17).

Here I suggest that films made by relative outsiders embedded within and engaged in committed collaboration or conversation with a particular community can still claim a potential sense of 'folkness', particularly when issues of perspective are incorporated reflexively as living problems into a film's creative process. Such a proposal is undoubtedly problematic. Allegorically the gaze of the outsider - whether the immediate gaze of the filmmaker or the eventual gaze of the audience - seems too easily to mirror imperial processes of exploitation and nonconsensual penetration into subaltern experience. The notion of film as cultural tourism (Higson

¹ Jean Rouch has also provocatively been referred to as a griot (Stoller 1992).

1984) serves only to heighten the sense of moral dissonance attached to etic experiences of Folk Cinema and it is worth noting that even films produced from relatively emic perspectives such as *Atanarjuat* or *Letter to My Village* function as forms of cultural tourism when exhibited to culturally-distant cosmopolitan audiences, through the affordances they create for bourgeois audiences to gain interior access to exotic communities.

Ruby has written pessimistically about ethnographic cinema's inability to counter ethnocentric prejudices, (2000, p.191). Such pessimism when applied as an absolute would seem to risk both oversimplification and determinism. In the authoritative words of Faye Ginsburg,

much of current postmodern theory, while raising important points about the politics of representation, is so critical of all "gazes" at the so-called "other" that to follow the program set forth by some, we would all be paralyzed into an alienated universe, with no engagement across the boundaries of difference that for better or worse exist. (1995)

Countering pessimist orthodoxies that would forbid any measure of cross-cultural interaction, such a frankly impossible state of non-engagement would seem to risk engendering a state of Western solipsism, complacency and ignorance much more problematic than the admittedly very real issues surrounding reflexive cross-cultural engagement.

2) folk cinemas aspire to ethnographic verisimilitude or 'authentic' representation.

Inextricable from the notion of revisionist representation are questions of the accuracy or authenticity of a given representation; of proximity to lived experience. Mikel Koven has discussed the notion of 'ethnographic verisimilitude' in dramatic feature films. Using Karl Heider's notion of 'naïve ethnography' Koven suggests that films pursuing such an ethnographic verisimilitude might thus function as a sort of watered-down ethnography (2008, p.9). It is interesting to compare the largely 'etic' notion of ethnographic verisimilitude here with that which might be considered its refracted emic counterpart: authentic representation. Both pursue a sense of truth, striving to move beyond degrees of inaccuracy to provide relatively authentic, accurate depictions of a collectivity at a given place and time.

Ruby's sweeping dismissal of the ethnographic value of cinema made outside a relatively closed discourse of anthropology (such as his discussion of Boorman's *Emerald Forest* (Ruby 2000, p.27)) seems problematic, particularly when one considers whether he would have been able to so readily dismiss the long-term embedded work of maverick auteurs such as the Amber Collective, who themselves harbour strong degrees of distrust for the interpellating metonymic gravities of the industry (Young 2001, p.79).

Indeed, in given instances art cinema's resonance with ethnography would seem to go beyond allegorical comparisons to confluences of method and priority. The work

of Amber and David Simon in particular displays strong parallels with ethnographic method, in terms of long-term engagement with 'subject communities'; periods of prolonged intimacy and 'time in the field' that would seem to equate at least partially with professionalised ethnographic fieldwork. Amber could also be said to articulate a compelling 'folk concept' through both process and representation, through collaborative working-methods pursuing a considerable degree of multivocality. The collective favour long-term, embedded relationships with communities (sometimes lasting over 10 years) in which documentary work is frequently used as a bridge to feature films. Koven's notion that fiction film is 'not documentary' (Koven 2008, p.9) is problematised by Amber and Simon, whose work, arising from long-term fieldwork, embedded working methods, and commitment to ethnographic verisimilitude, has a strong claim to documentary diegesis even when assuming the register of fictive performance; a sense of multi-modality, and complex 'interface between documentary and fiction' (Newsinger 2005).

Integral to an ethnographic verisimilitude of cinematic representation is what Pauline Kael lampooned sourly as the 'straightjacket of commitment' (Kael 1994, p.62): a pursuit of authentic representation through location shooting, use of non-actors, naturalistic performance, and community-devised storylines. For Amber, this is part of a process of embedding and immersion: stories grow out of the community, and actors play characters close to their own experience. A high degree of ethnographic verisimilitude or authenticity is therefore pursued in the stories, characters, locations, actors, costume, and spoken dialect of films such as *Seacoal* (1985), *In Fading Light* (1989), *Dream On* (1991) and *Eden Valley* (1995).

Ethnographically speaking, Amber also problematise neat binaries of insiders/outdoors by *living* and playing full economic part in the communities the collective have documented. Contrasting the Collective with 'parachutists' who "came in and then ... got out", Murray Martin claims "the fact that we were going to stay here and be counted, that was different" (Newbury 2002, p.120). Amber's status as outsiders is further blurred by the group's identification as working class artists. As above, Martin and Roberts felt strong loyalties to their experiences growing up in working class communities. Unlike 'parachutist' ethnographers, they did not leave (two of Amber's members live within walking distance of North Shields and Easington, where the Collective shot *Dream On*, *In Fading Light* and *Like Father, The Scar* (1997) and *Shooting Magpies* (2005) respectively). Unlike Flaherty or Rouch, the degrees of cultural difference involved between the etic perspective of the filmmaker and the emic perspective of the 'subject community' in Amber's work is – by degrees – much smaller. The collective are, in complex ways, still outsiders to the communities they are representing. Yet for Amber, as for Sembene, the sense of insiders and outsiders is sufficiently complex, and the cinema sufficiently embedded within a community to present a compelling case for a sense for folk cinema.

3) folk cinemas may aspire to choric, collective perspectives

The third key characteristic that may unite diverse folk cinemas is a collectivist

approach to epistemology and ontology: a sense of community perspective, of a collective subject and collective voice; of plurivocality, polyphony and pluralism.

The 'collective idea' again finds considerable resonance in discourses surrounding Italian neorealism. Echoing Teshome Gabriel's discussion of a choric community protagonist (1982, p.7) and Raymond Williams' notion of 'the collective idea' (1960, p.327), Wagstaff has postulated the centralism of tragedy and melodrama in neorealist narrative stems from the notion that "social organisms have ontological primacy, and that the individual exists as a component of an organism," in opposition to the "hero-adventure narrative matrix" whereby "the individual has ontological primacy, and society *derives* its existence from the primacy of the individual" (2007, p.61). Asked what characterized his approach to filmmaking Roberto Rossellini emphasized "above all the *choral element [coralitia]*. The realist film is, in itself, choral." (Wagstaff 2007, p.118). Such notions have considerable resonance with Gabriel's discussion of collective consciousness in Third Cinema, whereby individual characters are used as narrative proxies to invoke a sense of the collective (1982, p.25).

There would again seem a consensus amongst folk cinemas driven to varying extents by socialism around the notion of narrative paradigms premised upon the 'collective idea'. Rossellini's notion of a 'choric' cinema is present in multi-perspectival folk films such as Amber's *Dream On* and *Seacoal*, the Taviani's *Kaos* and *Night of the Shooting Stars*, and the television of David Simon. The choral narratives of John Sayles enact collective perspective in films such as *Lone Star* and *Matewan*. Federchenkho's *Celestial Wives of the Meadow Mari* adopts a multi-vocal approach to narrative through a vignette structure, with each 'chapter' of the film assuming the perspective of a different woman amongst the Meadow Mari community, whilst Sergei Parajanov's *Shadows of Forgotten Ancestors* eschews conventional individualist diegesis to articulate its narrative through the words and lives of the onlooking communities on the fringes of the myth.

The notions of collectivities articulated by Williams, Wagstaff, Gabriel and Rossellini do, however, possess subtly different emphases. One can identify a 'collective idea' predicated on collective heterogeneity as contrasting with a 'collective idea' premised upon a sense of unity or homogeneity, and it's illuminating to compare the archetypal every-men Hill has identified in the films of Ken Loach (Hill 2011, p.90) with the greater sense of individual inflection afforded the characters in Amber's pluralist, multivocal depictions of Tyneside working class communities. Indeed, performances of chorality in folk cinema warrant interrogation, for whilst filmmakers such as Amber aspire to a sense of the choric arising from prized commitments to multivocal process, elsewhere choric registers are frequently adopted or perhaps mimicked by filmmakers in the employ of more individualist, authoritarian diegesis. Even the remarkable choric properties of Jean Rouch's ethnographies are mediated by complex hierarchies, recalling Clifford's cautious stance on the Utopian claims of multivocal ethnography in general (1988, p.51).

4) Folk cinemas may aspire to filmic 'translations' of older 'folk' forms

A final attribute that may link diverse folk cinemas is the reference to older, traditional forms of 'folk culture', principally those arising from oral tradition. Attempts to transpose or translate orality into cinema have been much discussed in the discourses surrounding Third and Fourth cinemas and African cinema in particular, by writers such as Gabriel (1982, p.90), Diawara (1989; 1992, p.164), Sugnet (2006), Murphy (2000), Barlet (2000, p.143), Ukadike (1994, p.201) and Knopf (2008, p.83). The motivations behind appeals to older, indigenous cultural forms would seem self-evident, recalling Henderson's calls for Scottish artists to ground their art in folk tradition (Neat 2007, p.307), and Willemen's advocacy of Tagore's school at Santiniketan (1989, p.21). There is a recurrent trope in the cultural activity surrounding anti-imperial movements of 'returning to roots' in order to strengthen a sense of cultural autonomy and counter-hegemonic address, such as Sembene's project to "totally Africanise the style and conception of my cinema" (Pym 2004). Here, Gabriel's discussion of the 'second phase' of Third Cinema, which he calls 'the remembrance phase', is useful: "*The theme: Return of the exile to the Third World's source of strength, i.e. culture and history*" (1989, p.32).

Discussion of how one might 'transpose' older cultural forms into a cinematic register is illuminated by Clifford's lucid discussion of the "imperfect equivalences" of cross-cultural translation (1997, p.11):

one enters the translation process from a specific location, from which one only partly escapes. In successful translation, the access to something alien – another language, culture, or code – is substantial. Something different is brought over, made available for understanding, appreciation, consumption. At the same time [...] the moment of failure is inevitable. (1997, pp.183, 43)

This notion that transposition of oral forms to cinema is characterised by both partial failure and productivity is a useful lens through which to consider debates surrounding cinematic translations of orality in the work of African filmmakers such as Cisse, Sembene, Sissoko, Kabore and Alain Gomis, who have frequently drawn upon the wellspring of African oral traditions to inform their contemporary cinematic projects. In his theorization of Third Cinema, Gabriel discusses orality in the work of the Ethiopian director Haile Gerima:

[I]n *Harvest: 3000 Years* [Gerima] has created a personal style of "text in motion" where oral narrative art, with its symbols, references, and double meanings, appears to coexist with filmic modes. Like oral performers the filmmaker has used commonly known symbols and images of the cycle of poverty in a feudal society. As in oral art, the film relies on repetitions of cryptic proverbs and poems, symbols and metaphors. The storyteller's device of repetition to heighten, emphasize and deepen meaning is used throughout, giving the film a trance-like rhythmic quality. [...] *Harvest: 3000 Years* best exemplifies the aesthetic of liberation of the Third Cinema in the way it blends imaginatively oral narrative art with revolutionary film form. (1982, p.90)

So well rehearsed are the arguments for a 'totally Africanized' cinema in African film studies in particular, that an inflective counter-argument has arisen in the work of scholars such as Charles Sugnet, pointing to the 'impurities', hybridity and heterogeneity of the work of African filmmakers such as Djibril Diop Mambety, who Sugnet describes as drawing upon canonic Western influences alongside indigenous African traditions:

I do not believe Mambety, for all his interest in older cultural forms, was in any way a cultural purist pursuing authenticity. In fact, he was a cosmopolitan traveler who did not hesitate to make an "African" film (*Hyenes*) from a Swiss play by Durrenmatt (*The Visit*), and whose work is suffused with references to Chaplin, Keaton, and the French New Wave. The same holds for Sili and Babou, who know Wolof oral tales, but who also dance to Sud-FM radio and make their living selling newspapers printed in French. (2006, p.1230)

The notion of cinematically-rendered orality is not without its failures, as Clifford might term them, particularly when one recalls theorisations of a democratic, 'peopled' oral tradition. Hamish Henderson remarked "nothing can be called folksong which has not been submitted to the moulding process of oral transmission" (Neat 2010, p.34). In such utopian theorisations of oral tradition, stories and songs pass from one voice to another, subtly reshaped and rearticulated in each performance. Film, however, 'freezes' its content into definitive, hard-edged, 'discrete' forms that are abstracted from 'peopled' process.

In Scotland, Timothy Neat's *Play Me Something* (1989) provides an intriguing counter to framings of art film as resolutely 'hard-edged'. Neat's film consciously thematises the notion of storytelling, enacting a number of unconventional aesthetic strategies in its attempt to 'cinematically render' a culturally heterogeneous orality (the film's storyteller John Berger is English, his audience Scottish and the two characters in his story Italian). The film depicts the oral performance of a story by Berger, using carefully considered camera positions and montage to compliment Berger's expressivity as a storyteller. In counterpoint with this literal telling are three further layers - documentary footage, elliptical black and white footage and photographs placed in counterpoint with Berger's oral narration - which compliment the oral performance, yet do not provide a fully-actualised instantiation of narrative events. Whilst *Play Me Something* itself is hard-edged in that it appears in exactly the same form each time it is exhibited, Neat arguably allows space within the film's construction for Berger's orally-told story to appear differently to every viewer: the film's visual diegesis is structured to imply but never concretely depict narrative events, leaving final realisation of the story to be rendered subjectively by individual viewers. Neat's film thus seems to articulate folk concepts both through its textual representation (in depicting a multivocal community) and audience address: when we watch *Play Me Something* we are addressed as one of 'the folk'. *Play Me Something* therefore achieves something of the soft-edged, communal essence of oral story form, which changes shape depending on who is experiencing it. The film

simultaneously makes room for individual imaginations whilst bringing an assembled audience together, for a moment in time, as a collectivity.

And yet, the issues remain. Can a Folk Cinema escape its innate potential for exoticism at the levels of production and exhibition? The sense of a folk aesthetic, a command performance of otherness, is deeply problematic, existing visibly as a trope in less ethnographically-grounded popular cinemas (*Beasts of the Southern Wild* (2012), *The Wicker Man*, *The Emerald Forest*) riffing upon metonymized tropes of subaltern experience, detached from real life referents. As Vic Pratt commented on *The Wicker Man*: “if this is not how the customs were carried out, it is surely how they should have been” (2013, p.27). Too often the shaping influences upon cinematic representations of folk custom are etic tastes; aesthetics corresponding to the cultural preferences of the onlooker, rather than the priorities and experiences of the communities depicted. Folk cinemas must also address the issue of command performance. Deborah Doxtater has described how Western notions of ‘Indianness’ have restricted the work of Indian artists (1992), and such accounts may well incur pessimism about the likelihood of representations of subaltern peoples generated by hegemonic Western institutions and industries having value as the authentic expression of subaltern experience and concern. Jay Ruby has expressed scepticism about the power of ethnographic film to counter ethnocentric perception (2000, p.191) and the interpellating gravities of the industry (2000, p.44), a scepticism echoed by Amber (Young 2001; p.74) and enshrined in the collective’s prized mantra ‘distrust institutions’. It’s perhaps unsurprising that the folk cinemas described in this article are often made on the fringes, by filmmakers detached from institutions and industry production structures – Amber, Sembene, Kunuk, Sayles – who are able to place extra-financial priorities upon cultural sensitivity and accuracy.

Who is the subject of folk cinema? Does a genre lumping together the highly divergent experiences of indigenous peoples, nations negotiating ongoing histories of neocolonialism and exploitation, and Western urban working classes into one globalized category of ‘subaltern’ or ‘folk’, risk a highly problematic metonymics? The rousing advocacy of pragmatic universalisms by Leftish theorists such as Williams & Srincek, Casas Klausen, and Badiou, is highly dischordant with the contemporary arena of liberal identity politics. To corral multiple cinematic discourses into a homogenized Folk Cinema, risks undermining the essential autonomy of voice Third and Fourth cinemas are struggling for. We must also consider again the inventive properties of the word folk itself – the manner in which folk constructs the object of its own study. Considering folkloristic approaches in Scotland, Malcolm Chapman provides a counter to the Hendersonian, Gramscian call to take ‘folk culture’ seriously and coevally: “the folk that are in possession of the kind of knowledge that an academic might choose to call ‘folklore’, have no ... idea that within somebody else’s discourse their knowledge is so peculiarly marked”. Chapman notes that, as it is a ‘categorical requirement’ of folklore that it should be the “pre-rational memories of former days and ways”, then “any attempt to restore to ‘folklore’ an epistemological status equal to the knowledge that, say, a folklorist has, will be impossible, however good the intention” (1978, p.122). Is a sense of

Hendersonian coevalness denied, merely by the word 'folk', with its inescapable wider inferences of allochronism, distance and difference?

Whilst such arguments are compelling in their fatalistic pessimism, films like *Yeelen*, *Atanarjuat*, *Moolaade*, *Padre Padrone*, and television such as *The Wire* – would seem to outplay such impossibility. Whilst such films face problems of exoticism when exhibited and received and as communicative acts are continually subject to interpretive translations both imperfect and productive, it is too simplistic to say that, amidst the distortion, alteration and loss involved in such processes of translation, nothing is carried across. Considering the vast spectrum of issues raised when one places the words Folk and Cinema together, one wonders, conversely, whether the problems of folk cinemas (and, beyond them, a Folk Cinema) are not what make such a notion so compelling. Considering the highly considered, reflexive projects here discussed, the tentative, metonymic image of a Folk Cinema presented by this study is of a cinema intensely worried over, intensely anxious, and all the better for it.

The complex issue and divergent images of folk culture remain alive in cinema and popular reference both in Scotland and further afield. A significant number of the current generation of Scottish filmmakers, myself included, are articulating their own divergent folk concepts with varying degrees of political purpose and commitment to ethnographic verisimilitude. Such noticeable engagement from Scottish filmmakers asks for a corresponding critical engagement from film scholars. Notions of folk are admittedly changing (not least within Scotland), and there thus exists a challenge for both scholars and filmmakers to engage with conceptions of folk culture in a manner that does not simply recycle familiar, centuries-old tropes about rural vs urban, modern vs traditional, and elegies over disappearing authenticities.

Divergent cinematic engagements with subaltern culture, no matter how demonstrably emic, will - because of cinema's unruly, uncontrolled address to multiple possible audiences - never escape the shadow of exoticism and the allegory of nonconsensual penetration into subaltern communities. Such engagements – themselves premised upon acts of translation - would seem always a partial failure: always productive and never perfect. Recalling Ginsburg, however, such fraught processes of imagining others would seem, to this author at least, to be more useful to socialist, anti-imperial projects than an isolated, flagellation of the self, retiring into ever-expanding levels of onanistic self-reflexivity. Such a frankly impossible political isolation of the self and its priorities would seem proximate to the individualist, neoliberal self-absorption Harvey (1990), Jameson (1991) and Eagleton (1992) have criticized as being at the heart of postmodernism.

Ultimately, the fundamental notion of a Folk Cinema – that subaltern experience be represented in filmic discourses – is compelling, no matter how problematic. The notion that different cinemas, characterised by disparate, contingent engagements with subaltern experience, might talk to and learn from each other seems equally significant. Perhaps such a project might be better served by a narrower Third Cinema, Fourth Cinema or by Sklar and Giavochinni's notion of 'Global Neorealism'

(2011). Perhaps a Folk Cinema – an extra genre in an already cluttered taxonomy of politicized subaltern cinemas - is simply unnecessary. Nonetheless, the questions raised by pairing together the words Folk and Cinema seem valuable, and considerably productive. Returning to the words of Amber's Murray Martin:

Our paths been in a difficult area because the idea of documenting people, documenting working-class people is seen as passé, but also seen as dangerous, because it has the potentiality of being patronizing and exploitative, but only you've got to answer that question, you being me, ourselves (Newbury 2002, p.123).

The tensions and problems remain present, yet productive. A Folk Cinema so riddled with living, acknowledged problems and uncertainty must be a valuable cinema. As James Clifford remarks, 'the alert uncertainty is realism' (2013, p.49).

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